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AFTER HE DIED

Written by **Michael J. Malone**

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After He Died

Extract

MICHAEL J MALONE



**ORENDA
BOOKS**

1

Through a medicated fog, Paula Gadd looked along the line of mourners waiting to greet her. It took her last scrap of energy not to tell them all to leave. Someone gripped her hand. A woman she didn't recognise; her face a twist of assumed empathy.

'I'm sorry for your loss,' the woman said.

Paula looked from the woman's surprisingly strong hand to the powdered lines around her mouth, caught a wave of her sickly perfume and managed a question:

'Who are you again?'

The woman gave a small nod, as if acknowledging that Paula's grief was making her momentarily senile, then moved on. The words *Minister for Business* nudged at her mind. Thomas knew all kinds of important people.

Thomas, her dead husband.

She was way too young to be a widow, wasn't she?

When she first met him he was Tommy, but his drive for success meant a return to the name on his birth certificate. You can't be informal, apparently, when you're aiming for the big bucks.

'I'm sorry for your loss,' the next person said. A man in a black suit. All these men in black suits were merging into one. Except, the bulb shape at the end of this guy's nose was threaded with veins; Paula couldn't take her eyes off them, following the lines as a blue one crossed a pink one.

Must be the drugs the doctor had given her, she thought. To be fair, the only way she could handle this service was through a haze. She took a breath in through her nose, as if sniffing for a reminder of the name of the drug printed on the small bottle. Whatever it was, she was immensely grateful.

'I'm sorry for your loss,' she aped the man. He cocked his head like a dog might, unsure he had heard what he had heard.

'I can only imagine what you are going through, dear.' His smile was limp, questioning: *Don't you know who I am?*

She was already onto the next person, her hand reaching out, but her mind now retreating from the line of people, all of them keen to demonstrate their support in her time of grief. All of them leaning on ceremony yet shying away from reality, grateful they weren't in her shoes. At this thought she looked down at her feet.

Size three Louboutins.

She had had a great time choosing them. Never thought that when she was handing over her credit card they'd be on her feet at Thomas's funeral.

Next in line was a couple in their seventies who looked like they'd been eating nothing but watery soup for the last thirty years – their faces stripped down to nothing but skin and sinew. And they looked so alike. Were they brother and sister? 'Thomas will be missed,' said the man.

'First you lose your only son,' said the woman. 'How can one person take all that grief...?' She was silenced by a look from her husband. Paula decided they must be married. Who else but a spouse would look at you that way?

Already, she missed that way of looking. That *knowing*.

She ignored the comment from the woman. Pushed it to the back of her mind. That was seven years ago. Almost to the day.

That grief she wore like an old friend. A welcome reminder that Christopher had been in her life. This one was a new wound. Fresh. Gaping. A pain that plucked the air from her lungs.

Anyway, who were all these people? she wondered. And who decided we should line up like this at the end of a funeral service? Whoever they were, they were sick in the head. Without the chemicals soothing the barb and bite of her loss, this would have been enough to send her to the nearest psychiatric ward.

She'd always seen herself as part of a couple. A pair. Her identity

was wrapped up in that idea. She loved being married. That it was Thomas was mostly a good thing, but the state of marriage was what really gave her satisfaction.

Even after thirty years she loved saying to salesmen, 'I'll have to speak to my husband first.'

Now she was in the singular.

Flying solo.

Well, not flying so much as drifting.

Adrift.

And heavy with regret that in the latter years she hadn't made more of an effort.

One more person and she was at the end of the line. Thank the good Lord, the line was running out of the sympathetic and suitably morose.

A young woman stepped forwards. Wide-brimmed hat, large sunglasses, thin nose, plump lips. A chin that almost came to a point. She offered an embrace. Confused, Paula leaned into it, finding that suddenly, surprisingly, human contact was needed. The woman, a girl really, touched her lips to the side of Paula's face.

The woman spoke in a whisper and Paula felt something being slid into the pocket of her jacket. What did she say? Paula heard her clearly, but the words were so out of context in the situation that she struggled to make sense of them.

She looked down to her pocket as if she was trying to work out what had just happened. She raised her eyes to question the girl, but she was already walking away as if desperate not to be stopped. Through the throng all Paula could see was a back view of her black hat and a fan of long, straight, blonde hair across her shoulders.

'Who...' she turned to the man at her side, her husband's elder brother, Bill.

'That was tough, eh?' he asked, his hand light on her arm, his smile distorting his face. Then he turned away without waiting for her answer. Which figured. She'd always felt that Bill had little interest in her, and just over thirty years of knowing each other – twenty-nine of

them in a marriage with his brother – had done nothing to soften that feeling. He must be pleased, Paula thought. At last he had a reason to ignore her.

Oh, get over yourself, Paula. Thomas always said she read way too much into things. The man was grieving as well, wasn't he?

The woman's voice echoed in her mind, but through the medication she couldn't make sense of her words – their incongruity. People were here to tell her how much they loved and admired Thomas, surely?

She craned her neck and looked around the milling mourners for the hat and the blonde hair, but she saw no sign of them. It was probably some young woman who had a fancy for Thomas – he was a handsome man after all and he did attract lots of admiring glances. As far as she was aware he never did anything to encourage them, though.

Whatever his faults, he was a one-woman man ... wasn't he?

Her knees gave, just a little, but she managed to right herself, managed not to fall to the floor in a heap. A wave of bone-aching loss crashed down on her and she allowed her hand to drop away from the pocket. If it was a note, she should simply crumple it up and throw it away, unread. Whatever it was, it was surely just a cruel joke.

Thomas. My Thomas. She recalled the moment – was it really just a few breaths ago when the curtains slid shut, hiding his...? She couldn't bring herself to even think the word coffin.

She turned again to try and find the young woman. There was no sign of her, but her words repeated in Paula's mind.

'You need to know who your husband really was.'